

Nights at the Galata Hotel

Disoriented, I walked into a supermarket in Tirana to buy razors and soap. I realized everyone in the store was staring at me. I smelled like a home bum on a month long bender. The walk up from Vlorë had depleted me both physically and mentally. I checked into a four dollar hostel for several days and just slept. The soles on my shoes had worn thin so I knew if I was going anywhere, I'd need to find new kicks. I checked several second hand stores but never found a decent pair. On the third or fourth morning at the hostel, I found a pair of Nikes outside of the hostel that someone had left on the porch of a bando. They were my size so I took them and took that as my sign that it was time to move.

Winter was coming in the Balkans and it had always been my plan to head to Turkey for the winter. My plan was to hitchhike south to Elbasan. Once there I'd head east until I hit Macedonia. That was my whole plan at this point, with no time restraints. So I took off the following morning.

I bought six boiled eggs from a lady on the street and walked through Tirana to a roundabout entrance to the highway to Elbasan. I sat my pack on the ground and stuck out my thumb. Thirty minutes passed by and for some reason on this day, I had no patience so I took off walking down the highway. I walked for thirty minutes and then realized that I just needed to fly a sign. My mind was still not working properly and I probably should've stayed in Tirana a few more days to rest. So I walked back and found some cardboard in a dumpster and with a black marker I wrote, "Elbasan" and drew a smiley face. The very next car picked me up.

A Russian man driving an old Volvo agreed to take me to his final destination, Elbasan. After ten minutes of silence, he said in perfect English, "Where is your family"? I think that he thought I was running from the law, which made me respect him but also wonder about him and his life. He dropped me off next to a mosque in Elbasan and I immediately went to look for coffee. A couple of really bad espressos later, I took off walking around the town. Elbasan seemed a lot like the Albanian cities I'd been through. Not much money. A beautiful mosque and places to play football. Second hand stores and Romani people selling anything they can find on the street. The only food you can find is produce and burek. For me it never gets old, always feels whimsical and charming.

I was really trying to find a salad and some rice which is a lot harder than you would think but most people just make their own food here. There is not a lot of tourism outside of Tirana so it's mostly espresso joints with croissants, and burek shops. I finally found a restaurant that had salad and rice. My body was telling me I needed this. Look, I like burek but I really don't want to ever eat it again. I've had my fair share and every time I eat it, I end up in a coma. After my meal I noticed the workers gathering around a table eating what looked to be a pie of some sort so I asked what it was. It was homemade spinach burek and they let me try. This was different and I realized there was a big difference from the burek on the corner and the one that's made at home. I guess that could be said about any dish but I was glad to have my mind changed.

I hit the tracks and walked about ten kilometers outside of town. The tracks headed east out of Elbasan but the terrain is very different here. They run through the mountains and there are several active tunnels. The commuter train I think still runs from Elbasan to Librazhd. It used to run all the way to Pogradec but due to poor rail conditions, it was closed. The same thing happened on the line from Tirana to Durrës and there are many conspiracy theories from the locals on why the Albanian government left the rails to rot. I checked out some old, abandoned, adobe buildings looking for a place to sleep but the locals had been burning plastic inside or they were used as an outhouse. One of them had "Ronaldo 7" carved on the side. Sunset was approaching and the temperature dropped rapidly. I found a dried out riverbed and decided this would be my home for the night. The night was cold as hell and I slept in every layer I had. I was still so worn out that I slept for ten hours.

I went to the first place that opened and ordered two espressos and a cup of hot water to make my own Americano. I've found it much easier to order this instead of an actual Americano. I'm well aware how ridiculous this is but this is my vice so please leave me be. The bar somehow had two guys in there drinking and was completely full of smoke. They must've been in there all night. The place had just opened. They never said a word or even looked my direction.

I grabbed a new piece of cardboard and made a new sign. I got picked up about fifteen minutes later and dropped off maybe ten kilometers down the road. Albania has these small vans, similar to marshrutkas in Russia or what a soccer mom drives in the States, that transport people and goods. One of them stopped for me and the door slid open so I got in. They didn't ask for money and didn't say anything so I sat down. At some point I showed the driver a place on the map where I wanted to be dropped off at, near the Macedonian border. So, he did and I'm still not sure why, but he never asked for money. I opened the door and he waved at me and took off. I'd have to walk from here but I was happy to do it. It was still early in the day and I was excited to get to a new country.

It's actually a really beautiful walk to the Macedonian border from here. At the top of a mountain, there were some cows grazing freely and in the background, I could see Lake Ohrid. At the border there's a small café and a huge dog that has been trained to not like humans. I still can't figure out why I didn't get bitten by this dog but my hunger was greater I guess. His owner never called him off, just sat staring at the dog while smoking a cigarette from the awning of the café. All was forgotten fifteen minutes later when the man served me bone broth soup.

I don't know what it is about these imaginary borders. I get a high every time I cross one. I had been in Albania for a few weeks and I had been showered with love by complete strangers. I had fallen in love with the people and the land but that imaginary border between Albania and Macedonia felt real because that hospitality ended at the border. I walked into Macedonia with ease. I was surprised to see none of the border patrol wearing masks. At this point in the Covid pandemic, I had not seen this before from officials. I figured it would be easy to get a ride from here so I wrote, "Struga" and sat down where the lanes all turn to one. Fifteen minutes passed and nothing. Thirty. Still no bite. Forty Five. Nope. An hour went by and I ain't had as much of a look in my direction. The sun was shining and the soup had healing powers so I took off walking. Maybe someone would see me and decide to give me a lift.

It's a windy road up and down mountains with little to no room to walk. Maybe ten kilometers up the road, a car finally stops, "Where are you going?", a young man in the passenger seat asked. "Struga", I replied. He told me for thirty euros they would take me to Struga. I laughed, thinking it was a joke. It was indeed a joke but not in the context I first thought of. They started laughing and peeled out and sped off. That would be the only car that stopped. I walked all the way to Struga. I think it's around twenty three kilometers. Someone had warned me that it is hard to hitchhike in Macedonia and I felt I'd seen enough. When I got to Struga, I found the commuter vans and took one to Skopje. I checked into a cheap hostel near the train station.

Skopje has a really strange vibe. You know those red double decker buses that you see in London? They have those here. They have statues everywhere. Everywhere you look. Statues. There's a Romani camp along the Vardar river with little homes made of whatever they could find out of the trash and they are surrounded by statues. There's so much money pumped into statues here and so many people living in poverty. I never really felt like I could figure out the identity of this city.

Meanwhile tragedy struck back home. The first thing I do in the mornings is drink coffee and scroll twitter. I found out via twitter that one of my friends had passed away. His name was Riley Gale and he was the singer of the Dallas band, Power Trip. This really shook me for many reasons, but you can ask around and anyone you talk to will tell you this was about the nicest kid you could ever meet. He was

actually a grown man but I will forever remember him as the teenager in the green Detroit Tigers hat at local Dallas hardcore shows. I found a place in a local mall to print some canvas bags to sell for a charity in his name. It was going to be a few hours to wait for them to print, so I found a cafeteria to eat at. While I was eating, I saw my friend Will digging through the trash in the cafeteria. I couldn't believe it. I met him at the Rainbow Gathering in Albania last month. This guy is like a Belgian Tarzan. He has long blonde hair and carries a machete and is completely gentle. Everywhere he goes, he plays the flute. At the Gathering, he taught people how to cut down bamboo and make a flute. We ordered some more food and sat down to catch up. Turns out he and his partner Tamara suffered the same exact fate I had at the Macedonian border. They had arrived in Skopje to do what else, work on a sculpture. Their friend Victoria, who was also at the gathering but left before I came, was working on a sculpture here and they were going to help. The sculpture was two demons made entirely out of trash. So when they asked me to help work on the sculpture, without hesitation I agreed.

For the next week, all of my meals were paid for. Lots of burek of course and ajvar. We went to the old bazaar and asked the markets for fruits and vegetables at the end of the day. We had a lot of luck with a dumpster outside of the supermarket and several times had cabbage soup that Tamara made. I was really happy to work on this sculpture. I had free shelter, a hot shower, good company, and most importantly I could rest.

Winter was creeping in fast and it seemed everyday was colder than the last. I had been sleeping outside for so long that I was used to waking up with the sun. Everyone else stayed up late and slept until noon. I used this time to lurk around Skopje and paint. There's a huge yard outside of Skopje and one day I decided to walk out there. In Balkan yards, it's hard to tell what freights are active and which ones are dead. I usually just look at the tracks to see if they are silver or rusted over but even then sometimes that isn't enough. I really had to unlearn some yard etiquette that I had learned from the states. There's a yard in Serbia near the border of Hungary that I spent two hours trying to figure out a cutty way in and then just watched an old lady carry groceries directly across the tracks and through the yard and no one batted an eye. So that's what I usually do here. Walk in like I am passing through.

I checked out an old yard office that someone had used as a squat at one time about ten years ago according to a calendar on the wall. The Adhan started and I made my way into the yard and noticed several freights that were burnt, including a few from Slovakia. I hopped over a few lines and ran directly into a security guard. This yard is way out in the middle of nowhere so seeing someone here was not common, I'm sure. This guy was friendly though. He spoke little English but I told him I was a railfan from the States and that I wanted to take photos. He let me proceed.

There's an active tower so I didn't mark anything, just kind of took everything in. I tried to find some trackside spots but there's really nothing around here. I didn't see anything moving the hour and a half I was lurking so I decided to just walk back the way I came. As I walked back through the yard, I was playing with a stray dog and a new security guard came out of the place where the last one had been. I guess the other guy was gone for the day. This one didn't speak English and he wasn't friendly. I had a bad feeling. He motioned for me to come into his office and made a phone sign with his hand, "Police". This is where I fucked up. He asked me for my passport and I gave it to him. He spent the next few minutes on the phone with someone and I tried to remain chill. I was thankful I hadn't done any graffiti at all besides a sign in, in the old yard office and that was far off. After a ten minute standstill, I grew paranoid. The language barrier always adds to this. I had tried several times to get my passport back but he never put it down. I raised my voice and an English speaking rail worker came in to see what the commotion was about. He told the guard to give me my passport back. The guard got up out of his chair to talk to the worker and in the process, set my passport down on the table. I saw my chance and snatched it back and took off down the line and into the dark.

The following day I had walked back down the tracks to paint a wall I had seen the night before.

Someone had a fire going trackside and morning fog blended in with smoke from the fire creating a gloomy atmosphere in the railroad earth. I found some drawings done in pencil under a railroad bridge that if found in the States, I would think they were done by a traveler and probably a hobo. Here though, they were most likely done by a child. I finished up painting and walked down the line and a white cat appeared on the tracks. I followed them and they led me to a patch of magic mushrooms growing out of cow manure. I honestly contemplated taking them. I was near a river and surrounded by mountains maybe seven or eight kilometers outside of the city. It felt organic and seemed as if this cat was leading me here. Across the tracks I noticed a small gathering of people in a field but I couldn't tell why they were there because I could only see the tops of their heads. I walked up a small hill and realized they were preparing for a funeral. Another sign and I kept moving.

Winter had arrived in Skopje. The nights were brutal and I decided it was time to leave. I figured I might as well check out Kosovo before I head to Istanbul because I was so close. I checked on google maps and found a tunnel on the railroad and decided I would try to go there and paint a story inside. The next day I walked to the bus station and the restrictions had changed overnight. I would now need a PCR test to enter. This was the first time I had seen this but it would not be the last. I wasn't going to pay thirty euros for a test since that was the same price as a bus to Istanbul.

This route from Skopje to Istanbul is famous amongst hitchhikers and from what I've heard is relatively easy as long as you can get out of Skopje. This was not possible for me though because Bulgaria is in the Schengen Zone and the zone was closed for U.S. citizens. There was a loophole though. I could transit through Bulgaria as long as I left within twenty four hours. I bought my ticket and went back to the place I was staying at and told them my plans. Victoria offered to pay me fifty euros for helping with the sculpture but I didn't need money so I declined. The story of working on a demon sculpture in Macedonia and having a free place to stay was my payment.

Will had left days before to hitchhike to Turkey. Tamara stayed behind and they were eventually going to meet up in Istanbul and then had plans to go to a Rainbow Gathering in the south of Turkey. I had other plans though. There was this abandoned building near the Galata Tower that I had painted several times on rainy days. I had spent many days on my walk in Albania thinking of squatting in this building. So I decided to go for it.

I don't remember what time the bus left. All I remember was when I got on board, the whole bus smelled like cigarettes. They immediately offered me a nescafe but for once in my life, I declined. I wanted to sleep until we hit the border of Bulgaria, and I did. When I woke up it was just after midnight and I saw a neon sign in cyrillic. There were a few stray dogs roaming around and I remember listening to the song, 'Cars' by Gary Numan and it fit the moment for some reason. I'm always a little uneasy at borders. I don't care where I am. I see a badge and I get nervous. Control gets on, takes everyone's passports and exits. This is standard protocol in most of the Balkans but I still hate it and even though I know it is coming, I still get anxiety. Five minutes later, the control boarded the bus again, looked around and said, "Americano". I exit the bus and the control approaches me, "Where are you going?". "Istanbul", I replied. He seems to be ok with this answer but then we walk to the side of the bus and he wants to look through my bag. He takes out everything. Inside I have two small plastic buckets of black and white paint. A four inch roller, various brushes, white out pens, and a bag full of black and white Markal nubs. He's looking at everything then he looks at my clothes which have paint splatters all over, "What is your job?" he says. "Painter", I replied. He then pulls me to the side and takes out his phone. Just when I thought he was going to not let me in Bulgaria, he showed me several paintings that were done by his eleven year old daughter. He was just a proud father.

I fell asleep as soon as we entered Bulgaria. The rest of the ride to Istanbul would be at night so there was no reason to stay up and look at Bulgaria, which I had never seen. I was hoping to sleep until the border of Turkey but when I woke up, our bus was on the side of the road, broken down. This was a very

confusing time because no one spoke English and no one could translate. There was no wifi on this bus. After a few hours of being stranded on the side of the road, I contemplated hitchhiking to Turkey but I decided to just go back to sleep. After a few hours I woke up and we hadn't moved. The driver had pulled up the floor trying to do something to fix the bus. He gave up and he himself fell asleep. The whole bus started to smoke cigarettes on the bus. It all felt like a bad dream. After being stranded for twelve hours, for some reason the bus just started right up and we left. I don't remember arriving in Turkey. My mind was gone and I didn't feel human. A typical long international bus ride feels similar to a long trip riding freight. I made it to Istanbul and checked into a hostel near Taksim. I took a hot shower and fell asleep. I made friends with the Egyptian man who ran the hostel after bonding over a love of Mo Salah and I ended up staying another night. I decided to leave on the third day for the abandoned building near the Galata Tower to try and turn it into my new home.

There are two ways to enter this building. The first is through the basement. There is a hole in the floor that can be accessed if you go through a fence behind the dumpsters. The other is just straight through this old, rusty, metal door into the basement which is on the side of the building. I decided to put a lock on this door and I covered the hole with a board and put a barrel on top of the board to weigh it down. In the basement there is one room. The room had a prayer rug on the ground and another rug hanging on the wall. There was an old broom in the corner and dust and cobwebs everywhere. Someone had stayed here before but it was a long time ago. This room was too accessible to the street. It has three windows with bars on each and can be easily seen from the street. I didn't want to stay here.

The reason I thought this building would work to live in is because the entrance to where I would stay was difficult to enter. At the roof of the basement there was a hole big enough to crawl through but to reach this hole, you had to stand on something. It wasn't necessary for a ladder, it wasn't that high. Just a small stool would work, which I found inside the building. Once inside the hole, there is an open courtyard. The roof is missing. Nature had started to take over and there were even trees growing through old, wooden furniture. There were three floors with each floor having one room to the right of the hole and although it was probably possible to live here, it wasn't the best scenario. The rooms were facing an active street and they have massive windows. It was also too close to the entrance in my opinion.

To the left of the hole, there was another set of three floors. The bottom was the basement and the top two floors had three rooms each. The catch is you would need a ladder to even get there. I found a wooden ladder to get to these rooms. The basement was full of shattered glass and was out of the question. The second floor someone had been raising pigeons here at some point. Each room was covered with pigeon shit. The third floor was the one. It was obvious by things on the walls, that a Muslim family had lived here. There was a copy of the Quran on a windowsill and still various items left in the kitchen including a plastic jar of honey and several glass jars of peppers. If I had to guess, no one had lived here in over ten years. There were two rooms to choose from. The farthest room away from the entrance was my favorite because it had ivy growing in from one of the windows. This room would get sunlight in the morning and it was quite beautiful but also the windows were missing. So I decided that the middle room would be the warmest and most secluded. No one would even know I was here.

If you want to find anything in trash in Istanbul, you have got to wake up early. There are so many people that make their livelihood by sifting through the trash here. Almost immediately I found a couch. If you take a knife and slice open the seat of a couch, more often than not, you will find a yellow cushion inside. These cushions are perfect for sleeping on. I took two so my bed was sorted as well as a guest bed too. I took the old broom from the basement and swept the room. Then I took a bunch of cardboard and basically layered it across the entire floor to make it like a cardboard carpet. In Istanbul, there are tons of counterfeit clothes and a lot of the dumpsters here are filled with scraps. On one day I found a roll of gray material that was similar in consistency to a basic bed sheet. I layed this across the cardboard and I could now walk around my room barefoot if I pleased. There was an office building across the street that could possibly see into my room during the day. I took some cardboard and put over the windows and also used

the gray material for makeshift curtains. This office building had a strong wifi connection and I thought about trying to figure out a way to get the password but never did.

Wifi was a hard thing to come by at this time during the pandemic when most places were closed for dining or just closed period. I used a coffee shop that was about a five minute walk from the squat. The owner didn't mind and there was a dog that hung out on the porch so it was nice. There wasn't electricity at the squat or running water. I bought candles at the corner stores for pennies. I found a glass, heart shaped bowl to burn the candles in. I used the mosque at night to wash my face and my feet. I decided at night I would read books. This was also hard because the libraries were closed. I bought a copy of "The Night Circus" by Erin Morgenstern from a local bookstore. It was around seven dollars and I thought it was funny because a hostel was cheaper than that but this is how my mind works. Honestly reading this book under candlelight in a squat in Istanbul was a highlight of traveling for me. My own little hotel near the Galata Tower. I had it made.

I spent the next few days finding things on the street to make my new home more comfortable. I also found a five gallon bucket of construction grade black bucket paint that would last me a long time. I was painting things during the day inspired by The Night Circus and reading it at night. I finished it in three days and was upset. I read it too fast but I couldn't put it down.

The next day I went back to the bookstore and made an offer. I explained to the man that since the libraries were closed, I couldn't check out books. I wanted to know if I could trade him back this book for something of lesser value. He had no problem with this. The only problem for me is that he had very few books in English. I ended up with two used books. "Fever Dream" by George R. R. Martin and "The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment" by Eckhart Tolle. I went back to the squat and fell asleep early. I woke up in the middle of the night with the worst fever of my life.

I thought that I would just try to sleep it off but this was something different and the fever kept escalating. Two hours later and I was melting. I felt like I was on fire. I knew I had to find meds immediately so I started wandering the streets looking for anywhere to get them. It was raining and I walked all the way to Taksim to find a corner store that was open and had paracetamol.

I had been rambling since I don't know when. I'd been on the road a long damn time and my immune system was weak as hell. My brain felt like it wasn't working properly at times. I knew exactly what was going on. I caught Covid. I figured I probably contracted it on the bus from Skopje. It's November of 2020. No one is traveling and for good reason. But me? I couldn't sit still. I felt guilty and so I didn't tell anyone what was going on. At this time, no one was admitting to having the virus anyway. I honestly didn't know what to do.

The next day it got worse. I was having trouble breathing. I started thinking about the years of drug abuse. I had asthma as a child. My immune system. Maybe all of these things had something to do with why Covid hit me so hard. I couldn't even lay still. I had to constantly switch positions because I could feel it ripping through my bones. Every four hours when the meds wore off, my fever would come roaring back like clockwork.

There are several mosques near the squat. The Adhan was four times a day. These chants which normally I found beautiful would start torturing me like demons in my head. Each one screaming at me and bouncing off the walls of the hostel and they seemingly never ended. The nights became bizarre as I had trouble sleeping and paranoia crept in. Seagulls would fly into the courtyard and taunt me. I hadn't withdrawn off of heroin in almost ten years but this was eerily similar. I felt like I was in the Turkish version of Trainspotting. I'm afraid to go anywhere. How am I gonna get food? Water? I'm afraid to go to the hospital in fear of spreading the virus. All I want to do is take a shower and lay down.

There was a small cafe near that sold rice and lentil soup out of a side window. A corner store that

also had a side window. So I bought bags and bags of oranges and apples. A ton of meds and gallons of water. Once a day I'd go to the restaurant and order food.

There was nothing for me to do at night except read and I only had two books. Fevre Dreams is a vampire thriller set on the Mississippi River which further induced my paranoia. The Power of Now is a dangerous book. It was really great at making me feel pain on every level humanly possible. I felt guilty for thinking of anything in my past or the future and that's all I did during the day. Daydream. I see it in movies all of the time. When someone is close to death, they get extremely nostalgic and here was this book, telling me not to do it. All I could do was lay there and think. Not exactly the best choices for the times but I read them, over and over. No music. No movies. Nothing. I painted every wall inside the squat. I redecorated the room numerous times. I've been through some hellish shit in my life. A 10 year heroin addiction. 4 months in a segregation cell for a crime I didn't commit. I've hurt numerous people in my past both physically and mentally and myself even more so. But I always find it inspiring how life can create new ways to bring you more pain.

It started to get colder in Istanbul. I took the rug from the basement and cut it so that I could sew it inside my sleeping bag. I sewed it in with dental floss and burned the ends with a lighter. I reinforced the windows with more cardboard as best as I could. I found another old rug and using nails that were already there, I hung it over the door to my room. There was a curfew for locals now which was 9 pm. I used this time to walk around and paint. No one was around and the vibe was ominous. I kept walking to the Romani villages because there were tons of walls and abandoned buildings to paint. I noticed a lot of them were using these rectangular cans for a fire so I found one myself. I burned cardboard and all of the old furniture inside the squat. This was almost pointless. I couldn't get close to the fire because I couldn't breathe. The furniture was treated as well so it was even worse.

I tried not to look at the clock. Time is always the enemy. I lost track of the days. Maybe seven or eight days went by and nothing changed. The symptoms stayed the same. The highlight of my day was squeezing the lemon that came with the lentil soup, into the soup. I hadn't lost my sense of taste or smell and I'm not usually a fan of lemons but for some reason, they were amazing while I had Covid. Sometimes late at night and after curfew, I'd walk to the mosque to wash my face and check the dumpsters. I found a mix between a sweater and a peacoat, meant for a lady. It was navy blue with tiger stripes and I started wearing this over my hoodie for extra warmth.

For sixteen days I went through hell. Then one morning I woke up and it was gone. I knew it instantly. Something just felt different. It couldn't have been better timing. My friend Sarah was coming from Berlin in a few days and I was about to have to call her and tell her to cancel. We were planning on hitchhiking from Istanbul to Antalya. She had a one way ticket to Istanbul and a one way back to Berlin from Antalya. She had ten days to roam. She had never been to Istanbul so our plan was to spend a few days here and then take off.

So I walked for eight days in Albania. Then hitchhiked to Macedonia. Got stranded and most likely caught covid in Bulgaria. Then moved into a squat and almost died in Istanbul. So of course now my plan was to hitchhike one thousand kilometers. I was hanging on by a thread but I didn't and still don't know how to rest and I'm not going to stop living.

Sarah and I met the previous year in Berlin via my friend Wolf Daubin. We all met up in Poland and wrote on some freights and hung out. Then Sarah and I hitched from Berlin to Brussels in twelve hours. Sarah is tough as nails. Her mother runs a house for foreign exchange students so she speaks like forty seven languages. She's confident, infectious, and not afraid to talk to strangers. She's a pro hitchhiker and taught me what I know. The perfect partner to hitchhike with.

Arriving in Istanbul, Sarah brought with her a small package neatly wrapped in a paper grocery sack. Inside were several markals and a handwritten note from Wolf Daubin. It had been a long time since I'd

felt love.

We stayed at the squat for a few days and I showed Sarah around Istanbul. We hung out with cats in the park, painted some spots, and walked all over the place. Then we got a cheap hotel for around nine bucks to rest and clean up for the impending trip. This was the first time I had a hot shower in so long. Sarah's time in Turkey was ticking away so we decided to head out the following morning.

We left Istanbul before sunrise on the Marmaray and got off at Osmangazi station. Originally our intention was to take a ferry to Bandirma but covid messed up the ferry time schedules. We caught our first ride about thirty minutes in with a guy driving a box truck and wearing a Canadian tuxedo. He dropped us off at the on ramp to Izmir and assured us this was a better spot than where we were. Almost immediately we got picked up and taken a short distance to the Osmangazi Bridge. There we got coffee and Sarah found a roundabout to walk to and try our luck from there.

A forty seven year old architect and his friend from Bursa picked us up and he said he could take us to Bursa. He actually dropped us off outside of the city next to a candy cane colored mosque. Half an hour later, a man picked us up in a car and he was playing really interesting music. This is how I found out about Baris Manco, a Turkish legend. Unfortunately he dropped us off in a terrible spot. He was super nice and thought it would be an easy spot but it was directly on the highway and there was nowhere for cars to pull over. We knew almost instantly that this was going to probably be trouble getting out of. Cars were zooming by us and an hour later, it started to rain. It was looking pretty bleak. Perhaps the rain worked in our favor because a truck stopped and an old man rolled down the window. He didn't speak any English so we showed him on the map where we wanted to go and he motioned us in his truck without speaking.

Almost immediately I got a strange vibe. He drove eerily slow and there was complete silence for a few minutes but we were out of the rain, so I was happy about that. Sarah used google translate on her phone to tell him where we wanted to get dropped off and his reply was, "Are you guys married?". When she said, yes, I knew Sarah felt the strange vibe too. She pointed at a rest stop to the man and said we would get off there. He drove right past it. Paranoia started to set in. I grabbed my knife out of my pocket to be ready for anything. I felt stupid for not getting into the truck first but it was raining and honestly I was naive and trusting. I tried to chill out telling myself it was possibly just a language barrier and this vibe was lost in translation. This guy was probably seventy five and I finally got the feeling that he knew we were upset and he dropped us off on the side of the road. As soon as we got out, I saw that Sarah was visibly shaken. The man had put his hand on her leg during the ride and when we got out, he tried to grab her butt. I was furious and a whole lot of other emotions rolled into one. I felt terrible for Sarah. She's not the type of person that needs or wants protection. She does everything solo. But I asked her to come here and I felt guilty.

After this we walked a few kilometers to a petrol station. It was there that I realized during the commotion, I had somehow dropped my phone. Now I was thinking the old man had my phone. I had written an entire book on Albania on this phone and it was not saved anywhere else. Despair. We grabbed some food and made another sign and hung out with a cat at the station. I decided to walk back to where we got dropped off. My phone was sitting on the ground.

Back at the petrol station we met a man who spoke perfect English and explained to him our predicament. He told us to just walk out to the highway and that we'd get a ride, no problem. Five minutes later he came back and asked if we just wanted to ride with him and his friend. He was going to Balikesir. This was by far the best ride of the day. The man had lived in Miami and in New Orleans before but preferred Nola because of the food culture. I knew we could trust him. We were cramped in the backseat of this van but we didn't care. It started to rain hard and the vibe was still somewhat haunting thanks to the previous ride. We made it to Balikesir about thirty minutes before sunset.

We found some dry cardboard in a dumpster for sleeping mats and started walking around looking for an abandoned building. It didn't take long, maybe fifteen minutes. We made it up one flight of stairs and a man wearing full camo appeared from behind us. We assumed he was security and walked towards him. His name was Fatih and after talking to him on google translate, we found out that he was the owner of the car wash adjacent to the bando. We told him that we were hitchhiking to Antalya from Istanbul and just needed shelter for the night from the rain. Without hesitation, he took us inside of his office where there was a couch and suggested we sleep there for the night. A few minutes later Fatih called for the kid who worked for him and sent him to get olive bread and chai for us. Thirty minutes later he left us alone and zoomed off on a moped so he wouldn't be late for wife's cooking.

Both of us slept amazing and Sarah wrote him a thank you letter before we left. We wanted to try and catch a local train from here to Izmir. Unfortunately when we got to the station, we found it was not running. We ended up just taking a bus to Izmir. There have been some really great things happen so far on this trip, but one bad thing hung over everything like a dark cloud. Sarah just wanted to get a hotel instead of sleeping outside so I agreed.

We slept in the next morning. Due to the recent earthquake in Izmir, the wifi at the hotel was down. So I went and had coffee by the sea and hung out with some stray dogs. Around noon we walked to the on ramp to the highway and made a sign that said, "Aydin" on top and "Mugla" on the bottom. The top is the nearer city and the bottom is where we were trying to get to eventually. A guy driving a Benz, wearing a black track suit and a Rolex picked us up. He took us a short distance to the ramp towards Aydin. Immediately we were picked up by two nice construction workers and taken into Aydin. There we had Kofte at a small cafe where the workers were best friends and rival club supporters, Galatasaray and Fenerbache. Classic.

Our next ride was with a Kurdish man. He was playing Kurdish music when we got in and changed it to pop when he heard us speak English. We asked him to turn the Kurdish music back on and he was happy. He took us all the way to Mugla. From there we could not get a ride. We tried flying a sign for Fethiye in the center of the city but to no avail. I am positive that with no time restraints, we could've obtained a ride here and I feel that way about all of Turkey. Sarah's time was running out and she really wanted to be by the sea so we took a bus to Fethiye.

We arrived after sunset and found some food to eat. This was the first sign that this city had a lot of tourism because the food was noticeably more expensive here. Sarah had lent me a thermos to use and I kept bags of chai in my pack so I walked around looking for hot water, sıcak su. I kept nescafe in my pack as well and this is how I had coffee on the road. It's obviously much harder to find a sleeping spot at night and even harder in a foreign city. I tend to gravitate to the tracks or the water. Sarah pointed out a spot up on the side of the mountain and I thought it looked almost impossible. I was thankful to be wrong. It was a perfect sleeping spot. We gathered pine needles and made the bottom layer to sleep on. Then we made a layer of cardboard on top. On top of the cardboard we put our makeshift tarp. The night was really cold but we were feeding off each other's body heat. It wasn't a spot for fire and actually I think it's illegal to have an open fire almost anywhere in the south of Turkey. We woke up in the morning to the sounds of the mosque but the sleeping spot was secluded and had a beautiful view of the city so we stayed in bed until the sun came all the way up.

Fethiye is a really beautiful city. Neither of us had ever heard of it. It was obvious why people wanted to come here. A nice promenade along the water with citrus growing everywhere. They have a machine on the promenade to dump out extra dog food so the stray dogs can eat. Beautiful parks for children to play in. Farmers selling everything you could need on the street. We walked up to a place where people are building boats from the ground up. This was really dreamy. Just an old dirt road on the side of the mountain by the sea with skeletons of huge boats everywhere. There was a huge abandoned building above this and I spent a few hours painting on the roof.

The highlight of this hitchhiking trip was Sarah's idea. She wanted to climb to the top of the mountain and see if we could find a secluded beach on the other side. I honestly didn't want to do this and I know that sounds strange but I wanted to keep moving. There were other places to see and I wanted to finish the mission, I guess. Sarah was on vacation after finishing up a huge project. She wanted to chill and I wanted to go, go, go! I told her that it's because I have lust for life. She told me, "Lust is slow". Three simple words straight to my heart. I spent a lot of time thinking about that. She was right and she was also right about climbing the mountain because the beach was amazing. It was beautiful and she took off like a mermaid swimming all over the sea from side to side. I felt like an idiot but I was glad she was happy. We decided to stay in Fethiye another night. I was sure Antalya was going to be great but it would be hard to top where we were at. Sometimes it's ok to slow down. I am learning.

Sarah needed a PCR test before she returned to Berlin and she got that in Fethiye. Then we took a bus to Antalya on the day before she had to leave. We found a place near the beach and slept on a bunch of cardboard Balenciaga shoe boxes. In the morning she hopped on the bus to the airport and I was alone again. There were only a few days until Christmas so I decided to get a room and hang out in Antalya.

I was thankful to have held up physically during this trip after having Covid but I was having trouble breathing when walking up hills. Anytime someone was smoking a cigarette near me, I had to move. At this time I knew nothing of long haul covid but I started to read things. I was able to sleep though so I didn't pay much attention. I just went on with my day. I think I spent five days in Antalya walking around and painting. There was basically no tourism at this point. The streets were empty and I could paint whatever I wanted. The first night I stayed in a four dollar hostel but everyone there was drinking and smoking so I decided to leave the next morning. I walked around trying to find a cheap hotel and finally found one that was nine dollars for a single room and that included breakfast. This is where I spent Christmas.

After Christmas I was still yearning to do some hitchhiking. Initially I wanted to go to Diyarbakir in Kurdistan but it was just too cold. So I decided to head back the way I came and just see what happens. I went out on the edge of Antalya and stuck out my thumb. A few minutes later this Russian guy crosses the highway and walks towards me. He is smiling and asks me if he could take my photo. He was also a hitchhiker and just wandering around. I liked this guy because he was traveling with no money. He would play the flute on the street to get money but he didn't know how to play. You don't really need much to travel. Just a smile and some ambition. Literally as he was taking my photo, a woman driving a van stopped and asked where I was headed.

I told her I didn't really know and I didn't really care. She said, "same". So I hopped in. She was from Jordan and had recently bought this van and fixed it up so she could live and travel in it. She was filming a television series on alternate ways of living and she asked me if I was interested in helping her shoot some things. She had an idea of us going to Goynuk Canyon and shooting some scenes with a drone. I'd never heard of it but obviously I was down for that.

So we headed to the canyon but before we arrived we shot one scene down a side road near a Russian artists workshop that made sculptures out of gourds. I had known this woman for ten minutes so I was a bit skeptical. The scene was for me to get out and film her while she is driving away in the van. The van would be parked and she would roll down the window and toss out some red high heels, and speed away. I thought, "Ok this is where I get left on the side of the mountain" but I honestly didn't care and it'd make a good story either way. Thankfully she came back and we drove to the canyon. This place is really beautiful, full of swimming holes and waterfalls. We hurriedly hiked up as high as we could before the park was set to close and saw some mountain goats making their way down the side of the mountain to the river. I got the sense that the goats knew what time the park closed. I didn't expect to be here a few hours ago but that's hitchhiking with no agenda.

We drove back to Antalya because she preferred to sleep in the city which I didn't really understand but that's not my business. We got food near the sea and bonded over writing and she read some of her own poetry to me in Arabic. It was incredibly dark and caught me off guard. Poems about throwing herself in the Nile for her lover. She was heartbroken for a Turkish musician and I got the sense that she was lost. I guess we all are. I had enjoyed the day but I wasn't trying to be in Antalya so the next morning I got dropped off where I had been the day before and I saw the same Russian guy and he was confused as hell because he saw me get into the car with the woman from Jordan. I told him I ended up going backwards. The road.

Hitchhiking led me the other way and I'd had really good luck walking in the last few months so that's what I did. I just took off walking towards Kemer. I don't know exactly where I was because I turned my phone off for a few days. I found really nice places to sleep on the sides of mountains overlooking the sea and just took it all in. I could easily see why people would want to live here. The weather is great year round. It's easy to grow fruits and vegetables. There's beautiful nature. I was feeling healthier though and I couldn't shake wanting to paint Istanbul again. I love the south of Turkey but for me, there is no city in the world like Istanbul. I got a flight to Istanbul from Antalya which at this time was around twelve bucks.

I was so excited to get back to the squat. I still had the black paint stashed there and honestly it just felt like home. Oh but life tends to throw a lot of curveballs. I had a tiny padlock on the door to the squat. I had one key in my wallet and another stashed behind a brick incase I lost mine or if I didn't return to Istanbul, I could tell a friend that was in Istanbul where it was. I made it to the squat just after noon and my heart sank. My lock was gone and there was now a cable lock on the door. After a moment of confusion, I decided to look through a small hole in the door and I saw something I hadn't seen at all in Istanbul. A pitbull.

Now I'm thinking someone has found my squat and moved in and they are using this dog as security. Cats are treated like royalty in Turkey but to a lot of people, a dog is a tool and not a friend so this is what I thought. I started to think how cool it was though if some family had moved in and had made this their home. I figured I could just find another building and do the same thing but I really wanted that paint as well as some warmer clothes I had stashed. The next thing I know, three kids approach me from the street and are staring at me and pointing, speaking only in Turkish in a furious tone. Somehow I knew that they knew, that I was the person that had been living there. The oldest ran up the street and got an adult to come down and tell me I needed to leave or they'd call the police. I knew this was a bluff. The oldest was probably fourteen and the youngest maybe eight. The oldest was wearing a Galatasaray shirt so I used this as my talking point. I wanted him to walk with me to the cafe where I used wifi and we could talk via google translator. I was not prepared to hear what he told me.

These kids were Kurdish and this building belonged to them. Their father had passed away years ago and one of his friends had gifted this building to them. The kids lived with their mother two streets over. The reason the pitbull was locked up in the basement was because their mother didn't want them to have a dog. I couldn't believe my ears.

These kids were really cool and I told them what I was doing here and how long I had lived in the building and I think they were just as surprised as I was. They said they knew I was the person that lived there because of the paint on my clothes. I told them that I had to leave Turkey soon because I was out of days left legally, and I offered to pay them to stay another week or two. They were really happy with this and I gave them the equivalent of ten dollars on two occasions. I saw them almost daily at the park, playing football or just being kids in the street and they always smiled. I was particularly fond of the oldest kid. He was only fourteen but life had forced him to be an adult at an early age. He was a fierce protector of his brothers. I often think of their mother and the life she lives but unfortunately I never met

her.

I spent the next week painting all day, mostly in Fatih, Eminonu, and Karakoy. I did research during the day at the cafe, trying to find the next destination to travel to. It wasn't easy at this time. PCR tests. Border closures. E Visas. It was still cold almost everywhere. After a few days of researching, I decided to fly to Egypt. It was very cheap to fly from Istanbul to Sharm El Sheikh. This is a resort town on the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. From there I would start hitchhiking towards Cairo and then I wanted to walk to Alexandria. The flight was thirty bucks and the e visa which was good for thirty days, was around the same price. I was pretty excited to see the Nile and obviously the pyramids but I'd never make it there.

A few days later I woke up in a children's playground inside of Warsaw's Chopin Airport. I was on a seventeen hour layover and the airport was deserted so I had made a bed underneath a tunnel in the playground. I was waiting for my connecting flight to New York City. An opportunity appeared and my plans had changed. The pyramids would have to wait

Arriving at JFK in Queens, I scanned my passport and the alarm went off. This happens every time I fly into JFK internationally because of my criminal record. I know it's coming and it still makes me upset every time. Usually an officer will escort me to another room and I will sit there for five or ten minutes and then they will release me. This time was different though. They take me into another room just like they usually do but this time a guy in street clothes comes in and escorts me to another room. He is a special agent with the FBI. At first he started asking me friendly questions about traveling. He was curious how hard it was to travel during this time and for some naive reason, I thought he was sincere so I was answering his questions earnestly. He asked me about which towns I went to in Turkey and I told him. Then he asked me how close I got to Syria and I understood what was going on. The whole vibe changed and he asked me if I had been radicalized while serving time.

I had been in transit for like thirty hours and I was not prepared for this. On one hand I felt stupid for even talking to him but I was really mad at this guy insinuating that everyone from Kurdistan was a terrorist. My sandwich guy near the Galata tower. The people that picked me up hitchhiking. The kids from the squat. My chai guy. My favorite people that I met in Turkey were Kurdish. I lost my cool and let him know what I thought about his line of questioning and the United States government. Then I realized I will probably be on some type of terrorist watch list for the rest of my life.

There was a reason I skipped the pyramids and returned to a city that had lost its magic for me. Two days later I woke up in a train yard in Queens. It was a cold night and there was snow on the ground. My bivy sack didn't do its job and I was drenched in condensation. I had slept and I was alive so that's all that mattered. I crawled up out of a ditch to the tracks and saw my favorite track cat staring at me. Mr. Rollie Ruby. I first saw this cat when I moved to New York and came to this yard. There are always cats that come and go but Rollie never left. He was King of the yard. I smiled and walked over to a brand new Starbucks to get overpriced coffee but more importantly use their wifi. I was waiting for a message.

Sometimes in life an opportunity comes along and you have to weigh the risks. The rewards, yes but also the consequences. To decide on whether to roll the dice or not. If this roll came up sevens, I'd be able to continue this dream adventure I was on for a long time. I finished my coffee and the email I was waiting for appeared in my inbox and it read...

Crime pays.